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ABSTRACT

A study comparing the commitment to social change of college students in 1978 and 1988 is presented, focusing on those issues that directly affect black students. The responses of 541 incoming freshmen attending the 1988 orientation program at the University of Maryland, College Park, were compared to those of 1,091 freshmen who attended the orientation program in 1978. Results indicate the attitudes toward recruitment of black students and the university's influence to improve social conditions were more favorable in 1988, and black students in both samples were more positive about these actions than were white students. Student commitment toward social change, particulary with regard to increasing the number of black students on campus, is growing. Data also suggest that the level of commitment may still be at an early level of development. This may reflect general attitudes in the United States, and that tolerance for diversity is a developmental issue with which most incoming college students are just beginning to struggle. Since it is likely that the attitudes of students on campus influence the outcome of initiatives to increase cultural diversity on campus, the success of such initiatives may depend on the institution's ability to facilitate active valuing of cultural diversity. Tables are included. The paper contains 18 references. (SM)

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CHANGES IN SOCIAL COMMITMENT OF UNIVERSITY FRESHMEN OVER A DECADE BY RACE AND GENDER

Anne M. Regan and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report #5-89

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This study was done in cooperation with the Orientation Office; Gerry Strumpf, Director.

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UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND

Changes in Social Commitment of University Freshmen Over a Decade By Race and Gender

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to compare the commitment to social change of college students in 1978 and 1988. Particular attention was paid to those issues which directly affect Black students. The responses of 541 incoming freshman attending the 1988 orientation program at the University of Maryland, College Park, were compared to those of 1,091 freshman who attended the orientation program in 1978. Attitudes toward recruitment of Black students and the use of the University's influence to improve social conditions were more favorable in 1988 than in 1978. Black students in both samples were more positive about these actions than were White students. Results are discussed in terms of implications for campus race relations, retention and future trends.

Changes in Social Commitment on a College Campus Over a Decade

Increasing cultural diversity is a sociological fact in the United States (Axelson, 1980). In fact, in the U.S., the visible racial/ethnic group member population is expanding at twice the rate of the White population (Spencer, 1984). These changes are reflected on college campuses, in that enrollment of minority students has increased 33% over the last 10 years (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1988). However, within the category of visible racial/ethnic group students, there are notable between-group differences in rate of enrollment. For example, between 1976 and 1986, enrollment increased at the rate of 5% for Blacks; 18% for American Indians; 63% for Hispanics; and 126% for Asians. The enrollment increase for Blacks reflects the only visible racial/ethnic group with an enrollment increase less than the 9% enrollment increase for Whites. Furthermore, the enrollment rate for Blacks actually reflects a decline in the enrollment of Black males. Given the importance placed on developing multi-cultural campuses, the disproportionately low rates of enrollment increase for Black students merit investigation.

Student Attitudes Influence Campus Diversification

The attitudes of students toward increasing cultural diversity on campus may influence the success of initiatives designed to enhance diversity. Yet, Chickering's (1969) theory of student development suggests that developing greater tolerance and respect for diverse values, backgrounds and ways of being is an ongoing task for college students. Previously identified components of this developmental task include understanding cultural differences and accepting diversity (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976; Martinez & Sedlacek, 1982). Thus, developmental issues may interfere with student support of efforts to develop multi-cultural campuses. Furthermore, "respect for" or "accepting" diversity can take on many different meanings, ranging from accepting the existing level of cultural diversity in a particular environment, to actively promoting an accelerated, and corrective, rate of diversification. With regard to Black students, Proctor (1985) suggested that a failure to actively commit to increasing Black enrollment may be tantamount to accepting a reduction in diversity, because "you cannot wait for the normal processes of social evolution, because it's going in the wrong direction" (p. 43). It seems, then, that unless students are actively committed to increasing the representation of Black students on campus, they may be contributing, at least in part, to the relatively low rate of enrollment increase for Black students.

Thus, a vital aspect of students' respect for cultural diversity may be reflected in their active commitment to increasing the number of Black students on campus, as well as to more general principles of social change. For example, do they impede, resist, passively accept, or try to facilitate social change?

Valuing Diversity: A Stage Model

Hughes (1987) proposed a developmental model for the creation of community through ethnic diversity. According to this framework, students can move through six diversity stages: a negative valuing; exploration of the meaning of diversity; increased tolerance; principle testing; positive valuing; and human community building. The last two stages reflect an active commitment to increasing diversity. The positive valuing stage is associated with "overt role-modeling of values of diversity" (p. 544); the community building stage reflects an "active, living commitment to program planning that represents community building locally, nationally, and internationally" (p. 544).

Hughes' contention that minority groups are struggling to achieve greater valuing of diversity, while Whites are "largely disengaged from the goal to create and live in a diverse world" (p. 544) has received indirect support. For instance, White student views have tended to become more politically conservative since the early 1970's (Martinez & Sedlacek, 1982). In addition, White student attitudes toward Blacks have

been generally negative (Cartar, White & Sedlacek, 1985). In contrast, Blacks have been more positive than Whites about interracial contact (Ninatoya & Sedlacek, 1984). Blacks have been more dissatisfied with college than Whites, while White women have been more satisfied than White men (Nettles & Johnson, 1987; Sedlacek, 1987).

Trends in Student Commitment to Change

The fact that these attitudes vary by race, and in some cases gender suggests that student commitment to social change, and the increased representation of Blacks on campus in particular, may also vary by race and gender. An understanding of the attitudes toward social change held by different sub-groups on campus may clarify the role of students in campus efforts to create multi-cultural environments. In addition, a comparison of beliefs about social change in 1978 and 1988 would increase our understanding of student attitudes toward cultural diversity in several other ways. First, it will allow an assessment of the extent to which beliefs about social change have kept pace with demographic changes across the nation. Second, differences in the ten year trends as a function of race and/or gender can be examined. It is possible that changes in attitudes toward cultural diversity are occurring in the different groups, but to different degrees. These questions have implications for the social climate on campus, group perception of various incidents on campus, and ways to approach

different group members in order to reduce racism on the campus.

In this study, student beliefs about social change were assessed by considering their attitude toward active recruitment of Black students, the use of university influence to improve social conditions, and the basis for award of financial assistance. In addition, students indicated what type of experiences had significantly influenced their development in the year before coming to college. Of particular interest was whether or not membership in a political or social action group was identified as an important aspect of development.

Method

The University New Student Census (UNSC), a survey form designed to elicit general information on demographic and attitudinal questions, was administered to random samples of 1,092 students (49% male and 50% female) in 1978 and 543 (55% male and 44% female) students in 1988, as part of the freshman summer orientation program at a large eastern university. Since approximately 85% of all incoming freshman attend orientation, this sample is considered representative of freshman as a group at this university. In 1978, the sample was 86% White and 8% Black; in 1988 the sample was 76% White and 12% Black. The data were analysed by multivariate analysis of variance and chi-square tests. All findings reported were significant at the .05 level.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance with race, year (1978 vs. 1988), and sex as main effects for each of three questionnaire items is summarized in Table 1. The results of chi-square analyses used to investigate whether shifts in social or political experiences have occurred over ten years are presented in Table 2.

Social Change Beliefs

Year Differences. Incoming students in 1988 were more in favor of active recruitment of Black students by the university than incoming students in 1978. Similarly, students on the whole were more in favor of the university using its influence to improve social conditions in 1988 than in 1978. There were no significant differences between the 1978 and 1988 cohorts in response to "Financial assistance should be given more often based on merit (grades, accomplishments, etc.) rather than on need".

Race and Gender Differences. Independent of year, Black students favored active recruitment of Black students by the university more than White students. Blacks were more strongly in favor of the use of the university's influence to improve social conditions than Whites. There were no significant differences by race with regard to offering financial aid on the basis of merit rather than need.

There were no significant differences by gender on any of the items examined.

Social and Political Experience.

Year and Race Differences. A series of chi-square analyses were used to investigate whether shifts in social or political experiences have occurred over ten years. There were no significant interactions of year and race, with regard to the percentage of students who reported being influenced by participation in a political or social action group. However, there were significant differences across years for White males and females. For White males, friendships made increased in importance over 10 years, while significance of job experience, independent study, and contact with teachers decreased (See Table 2). In both years, social life was the modal choice. For White females, the importance of teachers decreased over the 10 year period. In both years, social life, friendships, and job experience comprised 70% of the important events.

There were no significant differences across years for Black males or females on any of the response alternatives. For Black females, friendships and activities related to school and/or work continued to comprise the most influential experiences (See Table 2). For Black males, social life replaced contact with teachers as a modal choice, but the difference was not significant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to consider the attitudes of incoming students toward social change. Results indicated that incoming students in 1988 were generally more favorably inclined toward these issues than in 1978. However, Black students were significantly more in favor of actively recruiting Black students and using the university's influence to promote social change in the community than were White students, in both years. There were no significant differences in student attitudes toward the award of financial aid.

Race Relations

If responses to these items are viewed as an index of commitment to social change, these results support Hughes' (1987) contention that minority students are more actively committed to increasing diversity than majority students. However, the data also suggest a shift in student attitudes toward greater commitment. One caution in interpreting these findings is that recent tendencies for Whites to express more positive attitudes toward Blacks have been accompanied by more negative behaviors toward Blacks (Jones, 1981). Thus, it is possible that these results reflect a general tendency for Whites to verbalize support for more change than they are prepared to help bring about.

It is also interesting to note that none of the group means were particularly extreme. Thus, a relatively early

developmental level of valuing of diversity can be postulated for many incoming students. This information can be used to inform student affairs personnel engaged in the design of diversity development programs. For instance, for students who do not value diversity at all, basic education programs which incorporate positive modeling of the values of human diversity as well as instruction on racism and prejudice, may be helpful. The racism course described by Roper and Sedlacek (1988) is one example of this type of program. In this course, the goals of teaching students about the origins of racism in the U.S., the difference between individual and institutional racism, and the design and evaluation of anti-racism programs, are approached in both a didactic and an experiential way. Throughout the course students maintain a record of examples of racism, as well as their own analysis of these events. Students also create and carry out a group intervention designed to reduce racism on campus or in the community. Outcome measures indicate that students are better informed about racism and more likely to recognize and take action against racism. For students who are already more open to cultural diversity, opportunities to learn about different cultures would be appropriate.

Retention

The retention of Black students on campus is an urgent concern. The results of this study suggest that, while there are positive trends toward cultural diversity in the student

body at large, Black students are more committed than White students. It is possible that the level of White student commitment to increasing cultural diversity may influence the retention of Black students. Based on research into the influence of noncognitive variables on Black student academic success (e.g. Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985), Sedlacek (1987) outlined many ways in which Black student life on White campuses could be improved. Several of his suggestions involve White students as well as Black students. For example, working to change White student attitudes and educating White students about the need for Black "communities" on an off campus are recommended. A promising step in the direction of supporting Black students on campus might be to consider the relevance of many of the Sedlacek recommendations to the task of increasing White students' positive valuing of diversity. It seems unlikely that an atmosphere conducive to Black success on campus can be created without facilitating the development of White students as well.

For instance, White students could participate in counseling programs or workshops designed to facilitate the development of White racial identity (Richardson, 1988). Theoretically, the development of higher levels of racial identity is associated with greater acceptance and valuing of cultural diversity (Helms, 1984). Similarly, the same workshops on differences in White and Black communication styles that Sedlacek (1987)

proposed as a means of helping Black students interpret feedback from the system might help White students interpret feedback from Black students.

The design of these programs should reflect the different types of events that have been influential on students lives prior to their arrival on campus. For instance, for White students and Black males, the majority of respondents indicated that social life contributed significantly to their development. Thus, these students might respond more to programs designed around a social focus. For Black females, however, friendships were selected as important events as often as job experience, while social life was considerably less frequently chosen. Here, educational programs with a small group focus might seem more relevant.

Summary.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that student commitment toward social change, particularly with regard to increasing the number of Black students on campus, is growing. The data also suggest that the level of commitment may still be at an early level of development. This may reflect general attitudes in the United States, and that tolerance for diversity is a developmental issue with which most incoming college students are just beginning to struggle (Chickering, 1969). Since it is likely that the attitudes of students on campus influence the outcome of initiatives to

increase cultural diversity on campus, the success of such initiatives may depend on the institution's ability to facilitate active valuing of cultural diversity. The information obtained here can be used to develop programs designed to hasten the development of greater valuing of diversity.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Analysis of Variance for Attitude Items

Year	1978								1988								
	Black				White				Black				White				Diff.
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		sig.
Item	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	at .05*
Active recruitment of Black students	1.88	(.91)	2.12	(1.01)	3.23	(.99)	3.18	(.88)	2.05	(.75)	2.13	(.79)	3.09	(.89)	2.94	(.79)	R, Y
University to influence social problems	2.73	(1.04)	2.78	(.74)	2.88	(.91)	2.85	(.81)	2.41	(.73)	2.74	(.83)	2.74	(.76)	2.65	(.74)	R, Y
Financial aid based on merit not need	3.08	(1.51)	3.47	(1.37)	3.15	(1.25)	3.18	(1.26)	3.54	(.96)	3.31	(1.31)	3.33	(1.16)	3.21	(1.21)	

Note. * Results of MANOVA with R = significant effect for Race; G = significant effect for gender; Y = significant effect for year

Response key: 1 = Strongly Agree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

Table 2

Important Events in Student Development

	Percentage of Respondants Identifying Item							
	1978				1988			
	Black		White		Black		White	
Event	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Coursework	12	10	6	6	13	10	3	5
Political/social action group	8	10	4	3	0	3	3	1
Group not involved in political/social action	0	5	5	5	8	5	5	1
Independent study	8	5	* 8	5	0	5	* 4	4
Friendships made	4	10	*18	23	13	10	*28	30
Social life	12	23	26	23	25	8	41	34
Job experience	19	18	*20	22	13	21	* 9	17
Contact with teachers/counselors	27	8	* 5	* 8	13	10	* 2	* 2
Other	12	8	* 9	5	17	6	* 5	6

Note. Numbers reflect percentage of respondents who identified this item as contributing the most to their development during the past year. All percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

* Significant difference, based on chi square analysis, between 1978 and 1988 for this item, $p < .05$.